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The training of the man of words in talking sweet[1]

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ABSTRACT

Discussions of Negro non-standard English (or Black English) emphasizes the most socially stigmatizing features. It is clear, however, that within anglophonic black communities a diglossia situation occurs in which the high form is a speaking variety close to oratorical standard English. This paper explores how this high variety is learned in one Afro-American peasant community in the West Indies as an illustration of the social and ritual importance of certain codes. (diglossia, Creole languages, the formal teaching of speech varieties, oratory.)

Many groups socially value one variety of language more highly than another, generally because it is associated by its members with a high status segment of the community. With the development of writing and a complex and introspective literature, the language variety so employed will often be accorded such high value because of the recorded nature of the medium and the need to be trained to read and write it. But such written varieties are not the only ones accorded value. Indeed, any speaking code used ceremoniously will accumulate the sense of power inherent in the occasions of its use.

All of these remarks were either stated or implied in Charles Ferguson's now-classic description of *diglossia* (Ferguson 1959). But as Ferguson there pointed out, though the native valuation will lead to a desire to use the *high* (or H) variety as the basis of formal education, there will be those egalitarians who will argue that the *low* (or L), the conversational variety will be more appropriate.

> The proponents of L argue that some variety of L must be adopted because it is closer to the real thinking and feeling of the people; it eases the educational problem since people have already acquired a basic knowledge of it in early childhood; and it is a more effective instrument of communication at all levels (Ferguson, 339).

The creolists studying Afro-American languages seem to have entered this

[1] Material for this paper was gathered during two field trips, one in spring, 1966, when a fellow of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the other in the summer of 1968 while on an NIMH Small Grant, MH 15706-01, 'Stereotype and Prejudice Maintenance in the British West Indies'. I am indebted to many for their critical examination of this paper, especially Dell Hymes.

controversy inadvertently. Betraying their egalitarian sympathies, they have ironically turned the tables on the proponents of H. They argue implicitly that because the creole L had demonstrable connections with the African past and is a systematic language system separate from European tongues – joined to them primarily by lexemic borrowings – that this is the code most worthy of study. Though extremely useful and informative, this exclusive focus on the elements of creole L varieties has prevented us from recognizing the full range of speaking competencies to be observed in these Afro-American communities.

What is most frustrating is that, though it is incontestable that there has been a consistent utilization of West African creole forms in the speech of the Afro-American communities in the British sphere of influence in the New World, so also there has been adaptive use of levels and varieties of Standard English throughout this area. Without describing these as well as the creole forms, one cannot meaningfully discuss the educational problems and potentialities of Afro-American students.

To be sure, there has been much fruitful discussion of linguistic acculturation by creolists whereby a continuum is posited in which there is described a range of code variations from the most creolized (i.e. African) to the varieties very close (or identical) to the European standard. As David DeCamp describes it:

> The basic alternatives seem clear enough. A creole can continue indefinitely without substantial change, as Haitian French seems to be doing. It may become extinct, as Negerhollands and Gullah are doing. We say that it may further evolve into a 'normal' language, though we are hard put to find documented examples of this, and even harder to define what we mean by a 'non-creole' or 'ex-creole' language. Finally, it may gradually merge with the corresponding standard language, as is happening in Jamaica (DeCamp).

Though this continuum permits us to fit virtually every New World linguistic code into it, as DeCamp himself points out, 'we still have not done much to identify the socio-linguistic factors that determine which of these four alternative courses a creole will take'. One of the reasons for this situation is that we know so very little about the symbolic importance attached to Creole or Standard, and therefore to the value-laden social uses to which they are put. We casually assume that because the standard is spoken by those who are socially, politically and technologically superordinate, universal desire for upward mobility will guarantee linguistic acculturation toward standard. But this approach totally ignores the social forces arising within black communities, even those in constant contact with Euro-Americans speaking a standard tongue, which encourage the persistence of archaic creole features, even when they are stigmatized, both from within the Afro-American communities and from without (Abrahams 1970*a*).

Perhaps most important in the understanding of this complex culture-and-

communication problem is the recognition that within Afro-American communities there is a deep sense of linguistic diversity, and that in many of them a native distinction is made between Creole and Standard. In the United States, for instance, there are various designations for varieties which are filled with Creole features: 'kid talk', 'country talk', 'talking bad', etc. Similarly, in the West Indies, there is much discussion of Creole as 'talking broken' or 'bad', and oratorical standard as 'talking sweet' or 'sensible'.

Given this recognition of code differences within these Afro-American communities, Creole and Standard may be regarded as a diglossia situation, for these separate varieties are recognized as separate, and their differences are the basis of both discussion and special social distinction.

The diglossia model operates successfully here because it assumes that the speaker within the community has a command (albeit a variable one, depending upon the individual and his attained social roles) of the two or more varieties. This essay will be an observer's report on a tradition of teaching a variety of speaking regarded as *high* and sharing many features of formal Standard English in one Afro-American enclave, St Vincent, West Indies. The objective of the study goes beyond ethnographic reportage to the demonstration of the social importance played by this variety, not for inter-group communications with the white world, but for intra-group performances within the community. But the focus will be not on the uses of the variety but the ways in which the community guarantees its continuance through formal educational means.

II

As in other parts of Afro-America, on St Vincent there is a good deal of talk about talk. This reflects a belief that life is to be judged in terms of performances and that talking of any sort is regarded as a performance phenomenon. One is constantly being judged by the way in which he talks or acts, judgment being based upon a sense of agreement between the enactment of a social role and the expectations arising from the social situation.

There are two basic categories of behavior, the *rude* and the *behaved*; the one involves *playing the fool* or *talking nonsense*, the other *talking sensible*. A wide variety of acts and events are categorized and judged in terms of this basic dichotomy. Rudeness is not judged as categorically bad behavior; there are certain ceremonial occasions (like Carnival and wakes), in which it is regarded as appropriate and is encouraged. In everyday behavior, however, rudeness and nonsense are responded to as inappropriate, although expected nonetheless, especially of young men. Since [good] *behavior* is often equated with *talking sweet* (speaking close to SE) and rudeness with *talking broad*, there is a linguistic dimension to this evaluative procedure. Furthermore, *talking sweet* has come to be identified not so much with the Euro-American world as with peasant house-

hold values. In contrast, *talking bad* is identified with male life away from home. The two varieties are recognized as distinct, then, as part of the native cognizance of the social dichotomy between female and male, the household and the crossroads worlds (Abrahams 1970*a*). This correlates with Peter Wilson's description of the distinction between male canons of *reputation* and the female code of *respectability* (Wilson).

This identification of language variety with a social dichotomy does not mean that women always speak sweetly nor that men always talk bad. These varieties are associated with the value systems of the two groups and do come into conflict occasionally. But most important for our purposes, the *sweet* varieties are associated with ceremonies that celebrate household values, while *talking broad* is stylized for licentious performances.

As part of the training in household values, then, one of the responsibilities of the head of the household is to assure that each of its younger members develops some competence in *talking sweet*. But this cannot always be done by a household member. More characteristically, just as there used to be elegant letter-writers to whom one could go for such a service, especially during courtship, there are those who are renowned in the community for their speechmaking abilities who will give lessons to children sent to them.

There are different kinds of speechmaking occasions involving different degrees of difficulty in the attainment of the speechmaking skills. Naturally, the more elaborate the skill the young person will have to exhibit, the greater the chance that he or she will be sent to one of these men of words. There are essentially two types of speechmaking occasions in which talking sweet will be called for: the home ceremonies like marriage fetes, thanksgiving, baptisms, and send-offs, in which everyone is expected to make a speech or sing a song; and the festival ceremony, like Christmas or Carnival masquerading, the school *concert* or *tea meeting*, in which the more highly trained young people are given a chance to demonstrate their abilities. Of course, these latter occasions call for a speechmaking apprenticeship considerably more involved than the former; and it is on these occasions that the man of words is called on to teach.

Paralleling these two levels of speechmaking difficulty, one may distinguish between two kinds of ceremony in the British West Indies, those which are connected with rites of passage and those which arise during calendrical rites. The former are strongly associated with the maintenance of the family and household system, while the latter gravitate in the opposite direction, toward the acting out of licentious and anti-social motives. Significantly, the rites of passage are carried on in the house and yard, while the licentious ceremonies are restricted to the country roads, the crossroads areas, and on the big days, the city streets.

It is in the household ceremonies like wedding feasts and send-offs that the smaller speechmaking occurs in which nearly everyone in the group is expected

to demonstrate their abilities. The calendrical festivals, on the other hand, are commonly events in which only the most proficient performers hold forth, but even here the performances gravitate away from speaking events toward action-oriented ones like dancing, stilt-walking, acrobatics, mock-wars, and various performances which will bring the focus of the audience on the brilliant costuming.

But there are intermediate types of activities, calendrical events which are either carried on in yards along the road, or in buildings other than the home. These events, more public that the licentious festivals but more restricted than the festival, are those in which the great oratorical eloquence traditions arise. Included here is the Christmas serenading common throughout this culture area, in which songs alternate with praise orations given by the man of words included in the performing group especially for that purpose. Here too are the acting groups, the Carnival play *mas'* (masquerade) troupes or the Christmas mumming groups who play scenes from Shakespeare or *Pilgrim's Progress* or the St George and the Turk play. And here also are the *tea meeting* orators, the fledgling men of words who come together to test out their eloquent skills in competition with each other and with the rudeness and nonsense of the audience (Abrahams 1970*c*).

The distinction between the two types of ceremony is paralleled by differences in the language variety commonly employed and the value systems symbolized by the variety employed. The household ceremony utilizes eloquence traditions which equate oratorical and elaborate speechmaking abilities with the continuing order and respectability of the household. The speeches engendered by these occasions overtly discuss the necessity of family order, responsibility and continuity. The language variety thereby comes to be identified with the canons of respect and family maintenance. Therefore, when everyone is expected to make their oral contribution to the eloquent proceedings, they are each being asked to make a declaration in favor of the family values appropriate to the household setting and the occasion.

By contrast, the licentious performances employ an emphatically creole, broken manner of expression, *talking broad* presented dramatically. This, when coupled with the stylized and permitted rudeness of such performances (and the expectation of embarrassment), indicates that this most creole of their codes is associated with the anti-social, with the motive of challenge to the household value system. This difference of speaking varieties symbolizes a clash of value systems, which I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere, between male and female segments of the community (Abrahams 1970*a*). This is a conflict also between the worlds of *being sensible* and *talking nonsense*, of *acting behaved* and *acting rude* (Abrahams & Bauman).

This conflict arises constantly in discussions of men by women and of the young by their elders. This does not mean, however, that nonsense is not

appreciated. It has served important social functions within the social system by giving the ones who would act on their rude motives their time of license. But in one ceremony, the West Indian *tea meeting*, the two worlds and their underlying values are brought into open contest, their values and language varieties counterpoised for purposes of entertainment.

III

On St Vincent the organizing idea of the tea meeting is not only to present the most important cultural information (*facts*) about the Gospels or Emancipation in oratorical form, but also to juxtapose the *orators* against the rude *pit boys*, each attempting to confuse the others. This contest motive is regarded as the central feature of the *tea meeting*. As one chairman, Charles Jack, discusses it:

> The pit boys and all that nonsense, that forms part of the enjoyment, the entertainment. Everybody there have their time. You have a time for the chairman, you have a time for the orator, you have a time to say poems and rags and so on. And you have a time to rap, you have a time to get refreshment. You have a time for everything.

Though Mr Jack here sets forth the contesting elements in terms of each having his *time*, in fact, the forces are constantly contending with each other. Those on the stage, the chairman, choir and orators, must constantly contend for the attention of the audience from the rude ones who would seize the limelight and confuse the performers. As Mr Jack pointed out, the primary tactics are through the *rapping* of the *pit boys* – banging sticks on the benches and chairbacks while chanting, usually for the refreshments – and the *ragging*, poems shouted by an audience member making fun of the speaking powers of an orator, through a slur or a boast. The speaker must learn how to respond appropriately – with a countering rhyme or jest, or simply by proceeding strongly. But the contest motive and the attempt to confuse through the use of rudeness and nonsense in ragging is evident throughout.

> The rag will be coming from the others who want to confuse you. I'll tell you the whole thing – it is that you are going on the platform and when someone starts ragging you, now, if you're not one who has very good memory, you're likely to forget what you had to say. When you're going on the platform and you begin saying your speech, now you're burst. They could mock you and that is the purpose, the main objective of these rhymes (Charles Jack).[2]

Both the *orators* and those *making mock*, then, are attempting to confuse the other. and it is this contest of confusion which provides the major focus of interest,

[2] This and the following are quotations from interviews held with the principle chairmen – professors on the island, recorded in August 1968.

But the orator must confuse through his command of *facts* and his ability to keep *cool* and be *sensible*, while those *ragging* operate with the strategy of licensed *nonsense* and *rudeness*.

Though the orator has always played an important role in the tea meeting, he has become more central to the ceremony within the last twenty-five or thirty years. Before that time, the major focus of the evening was the speeches of the chairmen; they were the reference figures for the orators, the ones not only who trained them but who they aspired to emulate and eventually outspeak. But recently the desirability of learning to speak well has lessened somewhat and thus incentives have had to be provided by the tea meeting entrepreneurs to get the scholars to commit themselves to the ordeal. Thus the chairmen serve as much to bolster the confidence of the scholars as to exhibit their abilities.

> . . . those days, the days when I started, the chairman and vice-chairman, secretary had to do a lot of talking, because there was no prize meeting in those days. But since we have a prize meeting we depend [more] on the judges, because you can say we as chairman, vice-chairman and secretary, we can say as much as we like, but the prizes for the children; orators and oratoresses depend upon the judges for the morning [when the prizes are announced]. We have only to congratulate them. Every three persons that speak, boys or girls, the chairman will congratulate such and such a person . . . and explain to the audience what the children are speaking about (Clive Richardson).

There has been a shift in the focus of the proceedings, then, in an attempt to keep the young's interest in *talking sweet*, in speechmaking. This, is, of course, one battle in the war to maintain the family system and household values of the past. For this reason, parents continue to encourage their children, if they exhibit speaking talent, to learn the tea meeting techniques and to enter into competition. This encouragement takes the form of the parents entering into an agreement with a man of proven oratorical abilities (usually a chairman) to teach speeches to their child. Commonly they will pay him to do this between $3.00 and $10.00 Eastern Caribbean Currency (approximately $1.50 to $5.00 U.S.) depending upon their ability to pay. This is roughly the equivalent of a week's wages.

The man of words teachers conceive of this apprenticeship as a *school* or *college* for *orators*, *scholars*. They teach by meeting with the entire class (generally five to ten students) about a month before the scheduled tea meeting. Usually these sessions are held on Sundays and the students dress in the church clothes, as they will at the meeting. At that point they will have written out speeches, *lessons*, for each, which the professors will read aloud, and discuss in terms of the theory of presentational principles, how to stand, speak loudly and clearly, handle the mockery of the audience, make counter jokes, appropriately flatter the judges, and so on. They will ask the student orators to read them aloud, acting on

the principles discussed. The *professor* will judge and comment along the way, correcting pronunciation, enunciation, misplaced emphases, and speaking rhythm. In other words, the professor is charged with the task of teaching not only the speeches but the proper manner of speechmaking, especially in regard to the features which the judges will take into consideration. The criteria of judgment are primarily the manner of delivery, the fluency of speaking, and perhaps most important, the way in which the scholar keeps himself composed and thus is able to manipulate the audience more effectively.

> The judges give a lot according to how the boy and girl are speaking, how they ascend or descend. He must know how to descend, how to lower your voice, and all that comes in when the judges are judging. (They are concerned) not only in the oration alone but how the boy or the girl go about herself on the platform (Clive Richardson).

The student then is expected to take the lesson home and commit it to memory within the next two weeks. Again they will meet on a Sunday, at which time they will perform for the professor and he will make further comments on their delivery. Usually, at least two and sometimes three sessions of this sort are held, but not always with all of the students present. One student may come to the orator's house in the evening if there is special help needed.

At the end of the schooling just before the meeting, the professor generally goes to the home to hear the speech and to make comments upon it in front of the parents. 'I'll call to their mother or father. They will hear their children's conversation. Any mistakes, I try to correct them' (Ledly Jackson).

This process had changed in the recent past because of the growing literacy of the population. In the past the children would have to be taught their lessons by repetition; in some ways, these days are regarded as having been more fulfilling to the professors, for they had a larger part in the training program.

> In some years, if I can remember, I tell you, I carry from here seven – between girls and boys – seven, from here to Kingstown [the capitol of St Vincent, where the meeting was held]. There were seven prizes and carried the whole seven here. And the girl that won the first best prize, I told the judges next morning, 'Show her a book and I bet she doesn't know it'. And they did and she doesn't know it. They showed it to her and she could never read the alphabet, nothing at all. Those that could not write, you see, I just repeat it over for them and they learn it or I use the strap to you . . . My children, they must know me victorious that night [of the meeting]. If not, your judges have trouble with me (Ledly Jackson).

The professor is thus deeply involved in the outcome of the proceedings, viewing the meeting as a contest of wits, a war of words.

> . . . 'Tis said, 'There'll be no peace until the battle is ended and the man who'll be victorious will wear the crown.' Supposing we had just one prize. I have my speakers, and elsewhere you have yours. You would like to see that speaker carry home the prize and what do you think I would like? Well, how can we have peace? (Ledly Jackson).

A professor will gather a following, especially if his scholars win with any regularity. A good student may come back year after year to learn new speeches. However, as long as the orator continues to learn the speeches as they are written out, he has no chance of ascending to the place of chairman. It is the underlying structure of the speech which must be recognized, and the willingness to learn to substitute different content units into the structural slots, thus learning to improve the orations, that would enable the young man (or, in at least one case, woman) to outspeak a chairman and to oust him from his position. As may be imagined, this usurpation occurs very rarely, but each chairman has personal legend (often performed by him in informal gatherings) in which he recounts the occasion on which he ascended to a chairmanship.

As with any other involved and improvised verbal form, the training of the man of words in talking sweet for tea meeting involves teaching him a repertoire of clichés and commonplaces, or 'formulas' as the followers of Parry Lord's methodology call them (Lord). At the beginning of the training, these non-metrical formulaic devices are embodied in the set speech written out by the professor as a lesson. As the orator progresses, however, he will begin to recognize that certain kinds of clichés are appropriate to certain parts of the speech, and that he may substitute if he cares to. It is when he has learned a large number of these and has developed the ability to improvise (perhaps making up or developing from books some runs of his own) that he begins to think of challenging the chairman.

There are essentially three sections of the oration: the *address*, the *speech* (also called the *topic* or *doctrine* of the body of the speech) and the *joke*. The speech is the central portion and takes the greatest amount of time. The judges will be primarily concerned with this section because this is where the demonstration of knowledge, of talking sensibly and factually, will arise. The younger orators, in fact, are taught only this section and a very quick, one line *joke*, for if they do nothing else, they must demonstrate the wisdom of their professors.

The first section, then, the *address*, is the optional one, but it is also the one which, when fully developed, leads to becoming chairman, for it involves the same kind of elaborate compliments and macaronic diction which the chairman must demonstrate. The major focus of the *address* is the ritual compliment, which may be addressed to the chairmen, the judges, the choir leader (*Mr Presenter*) or to members of the audience.

> Pleasant evening to these lovely ladies, also to these honorable gentlemen,

admitting Mr Presenter and his choir. Charming ladies. Mr Chairman, sir, whilst I was sitting in yonder corner, gazing on these *quorum nobis* young ladies with their silver laces and magnificent brooches, they were as bright as the wonderful star that led the wise men from the east into Bethlehem. Charming ladies!! (bows).

This address, which is one from what we might call an intermediate scholar, is comparatively bare of the eloquent flourishes which characterize the *addresses* of the accomplished orator.

Mr Chairman, judges, ladies and gentlemen, I feel totally ineducate to expiate upon a question so momentously to ourselves. It would be happy and necessary for Africa and the East, for I will be able to express myself before thee. And it is with privilege, hearing my name being called, I stand before you on this rostrum. Chairmen, ladies, and gentlemen, the grandeur of this meeting fills my mind with job and remitting felicity and, like Alexander the Great when he having manifest his vicinity at Alexandria and thus explain in the language Athenian, *careto claret primus disjecta membera* of the festivity. But let us please to remember that your Demosthenes *astronema* is here, whose intellectual faculty knows no bounds. Seated in the accidental corner of your rostrum, chairmen, listening to the copious *andoy op dos artac canum nobis*, so it is with concordial *crescentenana felices maniam que dices que*[3] *quaniam*, *pacito el picallo gabito quanto*. I have the privilege of arising before this rostrum to give my conversation. As in my lover's lap lying [much laughter], hearing, hearing my name so widely called by your secretary who writes *carenti calemor*. And so it is with great *viventi*, due *viventi*, *duos levitii*, that I have arisen to vindicate my call, and to let the vindicators of my evincitation be known (Ledly Jackson).

The *address* and the *joke*, which serve as framing elements for the *speech*, rely on a combination of erudition and humor, both being presented in as dramatically elaborated a manner as possible (as is made clear by the hypercareful enunciation by the most successful orators at these points). But the hyperbole of the address is commonly directed toward others, while that of the joke takes on a boasting form. One of the continuing features of the speech is the heightening of dramatic effect at the end of a passage by the statement, 'Tracing on a little further', or the question, 'Mr Chairman, must I proceed?' The concluding joke, too, begins with this question and always turns on some absurd reason why the orator must not continue because of the dire calamities which would ensue:

No, I will not, for if I continue these beautiful young ladies will fall on me just like the Falls of Niagara. No, if I go on I will break down the stage, leaving

[3] Reasonably accurate orthography is difficult here because the orator begins to alternate between Latin and Spanish allusions.

none for the common orators. Under these circumstances, I will not continue, but I will take my congratulations, for I am an orator.

> Once my enemy did attempt to run
> But shot and powder has recalled them back to me.
> But if these beasts had dared to run,
> I'll bring them back with machine gun.

So adieu.

But, as mentioned, the major portion of the oration is the *speech*. This is always a direct quotation from a book (or books) chosen because their content is appropriate to the *season*. This may mean, from the Euro-American perspective, that a passage seems to begin in mid-argument:

> Mr Chairman, sir, my doctrine I will not inform you of is about Emancipation. [Emancipation, thank you.] Ladies and gentlemen, but while Mr Clarkson formed a rich reward for his past labors, in the success which crowned his efforts, his triumph animated him for his new exertions. On the month he found himself elevated, he saw the horizon widen, and bright were his hopes for the future. When he said, 'But independently of the quantity of physical suffering innumerable abuse to vice in more than a quarter of the globe'.
>
> Ladies and gentlemen. We have reasons to consider, as like you to permit. Mr Chairman, sir, we have this great probability that Africa now free from the vicious and the barbarous effect of this traffic may be in a better state to comprehend and receive the sublime truths of the Christian religion. [Fact, Fact.[4]]

The ideal of the *sweet talk* man of words, whether an orator or a chairman, is to go *higher* than the other speakers. *High* means not only to ascend the heights of rhetorical inventiveness but to speak long and copiously. This means that the first two of the three sections will grow by the addition of compliments and greater portions of memorized text. When this occurs, it becomes necessary to break these sections into smaller units, giving clear enunciation to the beginning of the new unit. This is done generally in the address by having a formulaic series of comparisons with great men, and in the speech, by beginning each section with a renewed address or with the addition of the call for the question of whether the speaker shall proceed. Here, as an example, is a speech given by an advanced student:

> *Address*
> Mr Chairman, fellow citizens, ladies and gentlemen, including these ceremonial judges. Admitting Mr Presenter and choir. Wishing the audience a happy and joyful evening.
>
> Mr Presenter, sir, while listening to yourself and choir, I think it was Mr

[4] This interjection is not only an approving continuative, but an indication to the judges that 'truth' has been given voice and should be borne in mind in the judging.

Tennyson's choir singing in the St Paul's Cathedral. Then sir, to whom must I compare you? I must compare you to the great man George Fredrick Handel, now, the German composer. You are greater. I must now compare you to Admiral Collingwood, Lord Nelson's second in command at Trafalgar. He was born in 1750. He completed his excellence of Cape St Vincent in 1797. As for you, Mr Chairman, it is in island spread that you are a Biblical and classical presiding officer. Then sir, to whom must I compare you? I must now compare you to that great man John Ephilopótus who reckon the first King Syria after Alexander the Great [Thank you.]

Speech

Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen. I dare not close this chapter without repeating what I have said on this occasion. Those who fought for the freedom of their slaves performed their duty heroically, while but their duties still remained for those so early.

Your honor the judge, you know in the economy of God, there is one standard pathway for these races, by beginning at the bottom and gradually climbing to the highest possibilities of his nature. He will send in the years to come, the help, the guidance, the encouragement that the strong convey to the weak.

Ladies and gentlemen, may I proceed? [Proceed] Mr Chairman sir, must I continue? [Continue] My evening doctrine is about emancipation. Ladies and gentlemen, in chapter fifteen, page 179, 'Freedom Declared in Antigua in 1834, in Jamaica in 1838'. The Negroes continued most orderly, oppressive measure of some planters. The gradual improvement of the freed men. The committee of the Antigua Legislature reported: 'We do not, we confess, discover any sufficient reason in the island, why an honorous and strict emancipation should not answer as well as in 1834 as in 1838 or 1840.' The consequence of this report was such that this emancipation was there proclaimed without the intervention of the mistaken system of apprenticeship.

Chairmen, ladies. Though that system was proposed as a precautionary step it was certainly grounded on many ignorant and imaginary fears of the Negro character which was supposed to the people in Antigua to a bold and most successful experiment.

Joke

Mr Chairman, sir, must I continue? [Continue] No, I will not for there is someone else behind whose head's hot, whose heart swelling, just as a rosebud swell and burst out in the month of May listening for the voice of his sweetheart.

As mentioned, the task of the professor goes beyond simply teaching the speeches. Fluency, diction, and most important, audience command is emphasized. The student orators are taught that they must tread the very fine line

between *confusing* (amazing) the audience, by using large words and leading them into that special kind of active receptiveness characteristic of Afro-American performances, and confusing them too much and thus losing their interest.

> According to how high is your language, they [the audience] may not understand it . . . Of course, you'll be talking to a mixed audience, some more educated than you, like the judges, and some less. And in that mixed audience, if you go too high, some couldn't be able to understand you; if you go too low, some will underestimate you. So you have to meet all the sections of your audience (Charles Jack).

One must learn as well how to handle a mistake in the speechmaking:

> If you're talking along, and, for example, you make a mistake, rather than repeating yourself so that those who know will understand that you have made an error, give a joke right there. Or else, turn to the chairman, 'Mr Chairman, must I continue?' and so on, 'Your honor, the judges, must I ejaculate?' Well they'll answer you and say 'Well, ejaculate', or 'Continue' as the case may be. And it give you time to pick up. You must be able to do that at intervals . . . Or you might say 'Look, well, I'm going to recite a little poem' and that might work (Charles Jack).

The important feature, stressed again and again in the professorial teachings, is mental and verbal agility.

> . . . the moment decides and you have to be a fast thinker. And when you are in control, you must be able to know to think fast, what to do, how to do it, so that nobody vexed with you. And you get your call back [assent from the chairmen or the judges to proceed]. If they're vexed with you, you know, they'll start to heckle you. And when you start getting heckling, well you know the confusion. And when they confuse you, you know, that will mean the end of the speaking (Charles Jack).

But the answer for confusion may simply be inaction and silence, for this too means maintaining one's sense of the cool.

> The boys of Richland Park, they would rhyme the boys at Evesham [two villages in the Mesopotamian Valley] . . . when they are ascending the platform . . . They are trying to confuse them. They can sometimes make a joke back or sometimes just stand upon the platform for two or three minutes. When the rhyming is finished, then they can get to themselves . . . and they can carry on (Clive Richardson).

That confusion and contest rule this occasion is important in an understanding of why this ceremony has developed. This uproarious meeting differs from similar occasions for eloquence in European and Euro-American cultures because of

the various attempts made to 'confuse'. The battle of wits is so organized because the Vincentian would see little value in the demonstration of the coolness (or lack of confusion) of the orator if it were not tested, contested, surrounded by a heated up audience. Though the speeches are calculated to obtain the attention of the audience, attention does not mean quiet. In fact, if the speaker is not able to obtain the 'hot' responses of laughter, rapping, clapping, and continuative words (like 'fact, fact' or 'proceed'), he regards his performance as a failure. And well he must, because the alternatives to this guided response are louder noises, generally of a derisive nature. Thus, learning to ***talk sweet*** is calculated not just to show an ability to speak a variety of English effectively; far more important, it provides an occasion to perform, edify, entertain, and demonstrate, through the esthetic of the cool, the highest values of the group. By this, the group and the performing individuals achieve a sense of fulfilment – the group because it has come together and celebrated its overt values and the individual because his abilities have been utilized and tested in a manner that allows him to achieve status.

IV

The existence of traditions of this sort does not, of course, contradict the creole language hypothesis; but it does force a reconsideration of the direction travelled recently by those who have been testing this hypothesis on only phonological and morphological grounds. It is clear that even on these levels, however, the data being elicited are not totally representative of the speaking range of anglophonic Afro-Americans. To be sure, the variety of language which black children in the United States carry into the early classroom experience contains a higher incidence of 'archaic' creole features, and that therefore, if we are to develop teaching tools for dealing with these children, they must bear this data in mind in determining productive and receptive competence. As David Dalby recently pointed out in reference to this question:

> Although some educationalists now feel that Afro-American languages and their related European forms should be regarded as 'foreign' languages, vis-à-vis each other, it is quite clear to everyone – including their speakers – that they form part of the same linguistic continuum. We are in fact faced with a situation where social and linguistic forces are acting on this continuum in opposite directions. In one direction, we have what might be called 'centrifugal factors', drawing the subsidiary foci of black and white idiolects further apart . . . and in the opposing direction we have . . . 'centripetal factors', drawing these subsidiary foci more closely together. One result of these opposing factors has been the development of large numbers of . . . idiolects equipped to operate at two or more points along the continuum, according to the social environment in which they are speaking (Dalby).

The existence of traditions such as the development of *tea meeting* orators indicates that there are formal and institutional considerations which make an attempt to guarantee that there are those in the community who do indeed have a wider range of varieties, some closer to Standard English. These varieties are developed for the purpose of demonstrating upward mobility or an intent to communicate with Euro-Americans. Rather, at least in regard to the tea meeting variety, the code is used almost solely on in-group ceremonial occasions, and reflects a continuing adherence to African traditional uses and patterns of eloquence. Just how widespread such traditions are, and how deeply they affect linguistic performance in other less ceremonial situations is a matter which needs study. There have been numerous casual reportings of the American black performances of 'fancy talk' (covered in part in Abrahams 1970*b*) but no thoroughgoing reportage, much less analysis of such speaking. This I would hope would be forthcoming before we have too many more arguments on proposals concerning how to handle the black speech problem.

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